Manitoba

Newcomer women stitch masks that allow new Canadians, deaf people to read wearer's lips

Social enterprise also making masks that are comfortable to wear with hijab

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Alia Mohammed, a sewer at the Cutting Edge program, with one of the masks she's made. The newcomer from Ethiopia is getting employment through the social enterprise while making masks to be sold during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Jeff Stapleton/CBC)

comments

A Winnipeg social enterprise has turned into a full-time mask-making operation and is offering creative face coverings that show the wearer's lips, making it easier to communicate.

The Cutting Edge, which trains newcomer women to work as sewing machine operators, has made thousands of masks so far, and the orders keep coming.

"There has been a lot of interest, a lot of inquiries," said Anne-Lydie Bolay, operations director at the Cutting Edge program run through the Canadian Muslim Women's Institute.

"As we're going into fall and schools are going back, many orders are being placed by some of the colleges, also some of the groups that are advocating for accessibility."

Anne-Lydie Bolay, operations director of the Cutting Edge program, holds a mask that has a see through section that lets lips be visible, which helps newcomers in language classes. (Jeff Stapleton/CBC)

She said the program has been able to employ 10 newcomer women during the COVID-19 pandemic.

They started by making regular cloth masks but soon adapted, after hearing concerns from newcomers and others who had a hard time communicating with a face covering on.

Now, in addition to regular masks, they're also making masks with a clear vinyl window that leave the wearer's lips visible. All their masks are comfortable for women who wear hijab and are available in youth, children's and adult's sizes.

Alia Mohammed can make a mask in just seven minutes. They are being sold at retail locations in Winnipeg and to colleges and universities across Canada as well as businesses who want to buy a mask from a social enterprise. (Jeff Stapleton/CBC)

"This mask is perfect for newcomers that are learning English," Bolay said. "It's also perfect for people that have difficulty hearing."

She said the women who are making the masks are paid a fair wage, full-time employees get benefits and everyone is offered flexible hours because many have been negatively impacted by the pandemic in terms of child care.

"I'm really happy because I'm really enjoying my work," said Alia Mohammed, a newcomer from Ethiopia who's turned into a pro sewer.

She said she is now able to make a stylish cloth mask in just seven minutes. She also works on other orders at the Cutting Edge, including making shoes.

Thousands of the masks have been made at the Winnipeg facility since April employing 10 newcomer women. (Jeff Stapleton/CBC)

Mohammed said she dreams of one day opening her own business making clothes, but for now, she's enjoying working full-time at the Winnipeg factory, which is filling orders for masks all across Canada.

She reflected on the challenge she first had finding a job when she arrived in Winnipeg to be with her brother. It took six months before she landed a position in housekeeping at a hotel.

"We think Canada is everything, is easy to find job, to find work, but [it's] a little bit hard if you don't have Canadian experience, it's not easy to find job."

The masks are being sold in bulk on the social enterprise's website, through Local Investment Toward Employment and at Pollock's Hardware Co-op.

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